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ABSTRACT

The small private college does indeed have a future if it will roll with the times. Three suggestions which may assist in the survival of an institution involve the restructuring of course offerings to encompass: (1) the learning of salable work skills, (2) an emphasis on teaching the students to communicate and express their thoughts and ideas in speech and writing so others can understand clearly, and (3) an education in economic literacy to enable the student to become economically independent through personal money management. (Author/PG)

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DOES THE SMALL PRIVATE COLLEGE HAVE A FUTURE?*

by
T.H. Bell
U.S. Commissioner of Education

A headline a few weeks ago in The New York Times announced in bold print: "Alaska to Lose Its Last Private College."

The article that followed told how Alaska Methodist University, the State's only private college and one of its two 4-year colleges, will close its doors this July because of financial difficulties. As I read about its unsuccessful fund-raising drives and the sale of its land to another college, Alaska Methodist began to merge in my mind with the many other private colleges and universities that have found themselves in a similar situation in recent years--forced to close, to merge with a neighboring college, or to go public.

The Alaska Methodist story unfortunately is only one of many such stories about the plight of small private colleges that are circulating today. Problems of all kinds are bombarding colleges and universities, both large and small, across the Nation. Inflation is responsible for rising operational costs which in turn demand higher tuition. This is coupled with a slowdown in financial support for private institutions from foundation and other private sources as public institutions go after a larger share of private funds.

But I didn't come here to dwell on the present situation of small private colleges. You are all too painfully familiar with that. Rather,

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I came here to speak about a different and really far more important topic--Does the small private college have a future?

In answer to this question, I reply: Yes, the small private college does indeed have a future--if it rolls with the times.

The small private college that rolls with the times will survive.

The small private college that does not roll with the times will not survive.

To roll with the times means to adapt to them academically to give students what they need to live in today's world and to adapt to the economic strains that the times impose. It is that simple.

How must a college adapt to the times academically? I have some ideas about that, but before I get into them I want to concede that as U.S. Commissioner of Education it is not for me to interfere in how you run your colleges. Even if I wanted to, there is a law against it.

Nevertheless, as U.S. Commissioner, I do feel that I have a responsibility to speak out candidly when I see a problem in education and to attempt to exercise some leadership toward healing it. So here goes with three of my ideas--

First of all, I feel that the college that devotes itself totally and unequivocally to the liberal arts today is just kidding itself. Today we in education must recognize that it is our duty to provide our students also with salable skills.

We are facing the worst economic situation that this country has seen since the end of World War II, with an unemployment rate over 7 percent. To send young men and women into today's world armed only with Aristotle, Freud, and Hemingway is like sending a lamb into the lion's den. It is to delude them as well as ourselves. But if we give young men and women a useful skill, we give them not only the means to earn a good living but also the opportunity to do something constructive and useful for society. Moreover, these graduates will experience some of those valuable qualities that come with meaningful work--self respect, self confidence, independence.

I know that many of you would quarrel with listing a salable skill in any list of requirements for becoming a truly educated person. Some of you might grudgingly permit a salable skill to be listed but would quarrel with listing it first.

Nevertheless, in my view, many colleges and universities face declining enrollments today simply because they lack a strong commitment to this first and foremost requisite. Many would argue that a student need merely master the basics in the liberal arts and humanities to be well on the way to becoming educated. As I see it, this is far too narrow a view of education. Education is preparation for life, and living without meaningful work is just not living life to its full meaning and purpose. Certainly education for employment does not represent a total educational policy. The liberal arts will always have the place as the heart of the curriculum. But we need to liberalize vocational education--and vocationalize liberal education. In the process we will attain the full purpose of education.

I am aware that many small private colleges are moving aggressively to respond to nontraditional learning activities. Dyke College in Cleveland gives us an example with which you may be familiar.

Some of Dyke's new programs include an accounting internship and courses in retail merchandising, real estate, public administration, and paralegal work.

Hesston College, a 2-year institution at Hesston, Kansas, offers 15 occupational programs in addition to its traditional liberal arts programs. Typical offerings include aviation, secretarial science, agriculture, and social service. This school is also involved in a cooperative arrangement with another private 2-year college and a 4-year college in a food service program. From all reports, the curriculum changes seem to have been effective and successful.

These are the types of course offerings that need to be cranked up in our colleges to accommodate the student of the future--even the student of today. A basic knowledge of the liberal arts is still very important--in fact it is still foremost in priority--but I believe it can be successfully combined with programs emphasizing specialized skills. Selectivity is important. If you know your community, your students, and your faculty, the types of specialized courses that you might adopt can be adopted with a better eye to improving society and ultimately our great Nation.

My second idea about what a college should emphasize academically in these times is that it owes it to its students to teach them to communicate.

Every day, it seems to me, more people want to say more things to me. I'm sure most of you are having the same experience, and it's the same story in business and industry, in politics, in international affairs. As ideas proliferate, as facts multiply, it is more important than ever that a young man or woman know how to talk or write about them easily and understandably. It may make all the difference in his or her first job interview and will certainly make a lot of difference as he or she later presents the ideas that may mean promotion.

Are you teaching your students to express their thoughts and ideas in speech and writing so others can understand clearly? Can they listen to others and read their written thoughts with clear understanding? In today's world we must be verbally articulate. To express one's thinking and be clearly understood is vital to almost everything we do. A truly educated person must have this ability.

Third, in a world on a buy-now-pay-later whirligig that is gaining speed daily, a college owes its students some education in economic literacy, the simple fundamentals of economics.

Many so-called educated people never learn that you can't spend more money than you have coming in each month and avoid personal economic disaster. Their wants are insatiable, but their financial resources are limited. An educated person must have economic literacy . . . must know how to manage money as well as earn it. It's not how much a person earns so much as it is the difference between what one earns and what one spends

that will make a person economically independent. To learn the simple lessons of personal money management and apply them is what intelligent, rational people do. This, mundane as it may seem, is another mark of an educated person.

I have gone into three things that I think a college must do in the academic area if it is to roll successfully with the times. Of course, there are many other things a college should do. It should help a student learn to think critically, for instance, and to develop values and standards, to appreciate good health and nutrition. A good college has always done these things. What I have tried to do is to highlight three things that I believe are especially critical in this day and age.

I really believe that, if the word got around that you were doing these three things, students would beat a path to your registrar's door. The next question is: Would you be able to accommodate them? Have you rolled with today's economic stringency, or have you already been forced to let attrition wither your faculty, to let your library fall behind, to cut back on basic course offerings?

Many colleges, I know, have found ways to roll with a bleak economy. Many of them have maintained solvency by working together rather than attempting to compete with each other.

One of the most successful ways to work together is, of course, the cooperative arrangement, the consortium. To share resources, to interact with others who face similar situations, are very effective methods of strengthening and broadening an institution's offerings.

I have in mind such enterprises as that sponsored by the Connecticut River Valley colleges in Massachusetts. Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Hampshire joined forces with the University of Massachusetts to exchange just about every facet of postsecondary education--joint faculty appointments, interdisciplinary courses, cross-use of library facilities, meal ticket interchange, regular bus service among all five campuses, and even a five-college major in astronomy. In addition, a wide range of four-year programs is sponsored by the colleges, and so is a cooperative doctoral program.

Similar cooperative arrangements can be found across the country. One group of colleges comes together to discuss different methods of teaching science in a small college that has limited equipment and resources but unlimited student interest and enthusiasm. Another group of colleges meets to exchange ideas about the future of higher education and discuss research topics and recent experiments in education.

The possibilities are limitless. Cooperative arrangements can be used effectively to encourage the sharing of all educational resources--from teachers and classrooms to lab equipment and library books.

I think an important area where small colleges might look for assistance in the future is the private and business sector. This is a different type of interaction, but valuable nonetheless. Such cooperation gives students concrete experience as they participate in internships or work-study programs as well as encouraging the community to become involved with its college.

Freshman enrollment at Hood College, in Frederick, Maryland, quite close to here, was up 170 percent over 1973. Total enrollment was up 43 percent. The credit for this rise was given to instructional change. Internships and work-study programs at nearby government, research, and health facilities made education at this school a real preparation for the future. An interesting sidelight is that the growth in student enrollment at this college has been accompanied by an increase in the quality of students admitted. Since the change in curriculum, average SAT scores are up 10 to 15 points.

Coker, a small private college in Hartsville, South Carolina, stresses academic credit for internships with area businesses and industries. More than a third of the student body participates in the program, which is heavily geared toward occupational skills and future job opportunities.

The Federal Government is concerned about the future of our small private colleges. These schools help to insure diversity in our education system. As Americans we have always pointed with pride to the great variety of educational experiences available within our single Nation. We cannot permit one of our Nation's greatest assets to fade or, worse yet, disappear.

To restructure course offerings with an eye to salable work skills, to communication skills, and to economic skills, and to work together as complimentary units--these are key areas for concern by all colleges, large and small, in the future.

I feel confident that our small private colleges have a future, and a bright one. And I am confident as well that the future of American education is secure in the able hands of educators as well qualified as those gathered here today.

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